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Publicity Said to Have Upset Defector

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 12 — Vitaly S. Yurchenko, once portrayed by the United States as a valuable Soviet defector, had hoped to live anonymously with a woman on the West Coast after he had been thoroughly questioned by the Central Intelligence Agency, a senior intelligence official said today.

But during his interviews, the official said, Federal Bureau of Investigation officers who participated in the C.I.A. interrogations repeatedly showed Mr. Yurchenko newspaper clippings describing his defection. That is when "he began thinking maybe he'd made a big mistake," the official said.

"He was very, very upset," the official added.

In his comments, the official sought to lay some of the blame for Mr. Yurchenko's decision to return to the Soviet Union on the F.B.I.

At the F.B.I. today, Lane Bonner, a press officer, said that when Mr. Yurchenko "was in the United States, he had free access to television, radio and newspapers. It's absurd to say any person provided him with clips when he had free access to that."

But Mr. Yurchenko said at a news conference last week that he was shown newspaper clippings describing his disclosures, and that the officials who brought them "were looking at me as if they were looking at zoo animals," to see how he would respond.

The senior intelligence official, who has been briefed on Mr. Yurchenko's interviews, said, "He thought he could keep even the Soviet Union from knowing where he was. He thought he could beat the system and just disappear into the great, blue yonder."

Mr. Yurchenko, described by many American officials as a senior K.G.B. officer who defected to the United States in August, had been portrayed one of the most significant defectors of

recent times. But he left his C.I.A. escort last week and walked to the Soviet diplomatic compound here.

After holding a news conference there denouncing the C.I.A., he returned to the Soviet Union. In the days since, the C.I.A. has been under increasing attack, from the White House, Congress and elsewhere, for its handling of Mr. Yurchenko. Questions have also been raised about the quality of information he provided, and whether he was even as senior a member of the K.G.B. as some American officials have maintained.

A senior official said the prevailing view among Reagan Administration officials was that the affair was "a major embarrassment." A White House official called it "quite a blunder."

But the intelligence official said the agency had to allow Mr. Yurchenko some freedom because "he had to adjust to life in the United States."

'They Couldn't Lock Him Up'

Even when officers realized Mr. Yurchenko was growing restive, "they couldn't lock him up. What are they going to do: put a ball and chain on him?" the official asked.

Still, he said, Mr. Yurchenko was watched most of the time, "for his own protection" since Soviet defectors are often afraid they will be kidnapped or assassinated. "He didn't spend much time alone."

Even when Mr. Yurchenko visited a Washington-area bowling alley to sign up for a bowling league, "someone was with him," an official said. "He was nicely treated — as a colleague."

But ultimately, the intelligence official said, "If he had said he wanted to go home, they would have talked to him about it, but if he still wanted to go they would have taken him to the Department of State and let him go. Why have a guy on our hands forever who doesn't want to be here?"

In recent days, members of Congress and others have said they believed the

C.I.A. should have done a better job of trying to help Mr. Yurchenko cope with the emotional trauma that defectors almost invariably experience, if emotional turmoil was in fact the reason he returned to the Soviet Union. Some officials believe Mr. Yurchenko was a double agent, sent here by the K.G.B.

"Either a mistake was made in getting into this situation, or a colossal mistake was made in not spotting a double agent," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, the Intelligence Committee's vice chairman.

Administration officials "were sucked in" by the C.I.A., a senior official said, adding that for two or three months agency officials touted Yurchenko as a wholly reliable defector.

"The more we pressed," the Administration official added, "the more reassurance we got. Then Yurchenko goes back, and all of a sudden the agency says they had doubts all along."

'Too Much Terrific Data'

Although the C.I.A. can never know for certain, officials said, agency officers do not believe the theory that Mr. Yurchenko was a plant because "he gave too much terrific data," an official said.

Mr. Yurchenko gave his debriefers "the locations of scores of Soviet spies throughout the world, in the United States and in Canada," the official said. "He described where the K.G.B.'s internal security problems are."

"It's always conceivable that it's all a big put-on," the official added. "But so far we have no reason to doubt him because all the leads checked so far have been good," although he added that much of Mr. Yurchenko's information still has not been checked.

Last week, the C.I.A. released a biography of Mr. Yurchenko, an unusual step that some officials viewed as an effort to counter criticism of the agency's handling of Mr. Yurchenko, an explanation the C.I.A. denies.

In September, Mr. Yurchenko visited the wife of a Soviet official in Canada. Officials said Mr. Yurchenko had been romantically involved with the woman while they both were stationed in Washington during the late 1970's.

In September, he tried to persuade her to join him in the United States, officials said, but she declined; because "he looked better as a K.G.B. officer than as a defector," an Administration official said today.